

# Steve GELLER

## STATE SENATOR DISTRICT 29 2002 Legislative Session Report

### District address:

400 S. Federal Hwy, Suite 204  
Hallandale Beach 33009  
954-893-5089  
954-893-5091

### Capital Address:

222 SOB  
404 South Monroe St.  
Tallahassee 32399

### Assistants:

Sandy Bergman  
John Reid  
Gail Schwartz  
Julie Wilkins

### Committees:

Agriculture and Consumer Services  
(Chair)

Banking & Insurance

Comprehensive Planning, Local &  
Military Affairs

Finance & Taxation

Reapportionment - Legislative  
Subcommittee

Regulated Industries

Rules & Calendar

### E-mail:

[geller.steven.web@leg.state.fl.us](mailto:geller.steven.web@leg.state.fl.us)

### Dear Friends:

The 2002 Legislative Session was an extraordinary blend of issues and circumstances. Issues such as domestic security and redistricting amplified the intensity of our regular law-making responsibilities. The once-a-decade statewide process of redistricting the Florida House and Senate and the US Congress to ensure equal representation, combined with the severe economic circumstances, made this session more unusual and challenging than in past years. The impact of the September 11th tragedy cast a further pall over the entire session.

Despite many critical demands, the Florida Senate managed to remain relatively unified. In a strong, bi-partisan fashion, the Senate addressed issues of importance to the State of Florida, such as environmental issues, tax reform, and insurance reform. Though many vital Senate initiatives did not survive the entire legislative process, the Legislature as a whole was successful in passing some significant legislation. These include funding the Everglades Restoration Project, stabilizing Florida Windstorm Insurance rates and strengthening state security.

Within the pages of this newsletter, you will read about several bills I sponsored that have become law, such as those providing benefits to survivors of law officers and firefighters, enabling homeowners to display the American flag without penalty, and enforcing stronger safeguards in the use of crop dusters.

Two other bills that I sponsored have passed and are worthy of mention:

- The Condominium/Cooperative/Mobile Homes bill provides numerous technical amendments to condominium law and directs the Bureau of Condominiums to give priority to condominium election challenges. Condominiums are small local governments, so their election processes must be beyond question.
- The Misbranded Food Products bill ensures honest labeling procedures and mandates that the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services close manufacturers' operations when there is continued misrepresentation of nutritional contents. Food labels provide vital information for us all, especially for those on restricted diets. Companies that misrepresent nutritional values should no longer be able to sell their product.

Although we accomplished some important things, problems remain. One such problem is that our education system is still not on par with the rest of the nation. Another low point was the state budget. I have always fought to support public education and almost always voted for the state budget. This year, I was unable to vote for the budget, as it did not sufficiently support our public school system.

I invite you to read about this recent session, and I welcome your comments. Please call or email my office and let me know what is on your mind so that I can better represent you. Again, I thank you for the opportunity to serve as your State Senator.

Sincerely,

State Senator

## Education, Natural Resources and the Budget

The State Legislature is required by the Florida Constitution to pass the state budget each year. Most legislators try to improve the budget as much as they can, and then vote for the budget. This year was different. Money was taken out of an environmental trust fund; corporate tax breaks were passed at the expense of education. I voted against the budget.

Like many other states in the union, Florida's financial footing was shaky this year. The reasons were many: tax breaks granted during rosier times were allowed to continue, new large corporate tax breaks were granted, Congressional acts decreased state revenues, Internet sales reduced sales-tax revenues, and the economic aftershocks of September 11th further worsened an already uncertain economic situation. All told, this combination left Florida's budget in a great mess.

Though the 2002 budget did not have excess revenue available for corporate tax cuts, the Governor pushed through a bill that will reduce state revenue by \$438 million over the next three years. I voted against this bill, as did the Senate President and the Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. This tax cut passed anyhow.

It is clear that with the state's financial picture so bleak, funding corporate tax cuts would have to cause other problems elsewhere in the budget.

- **Education Was Insufficiently Funded** - In fact, Florida was the only state in the nation to decrease spending on education in real terms. In other words, our education budget does not allow for growth in student enrollment, inflation or similar items. I believe that our public education system has been the essential unifier that has made this country great. Depriving the educational system of the minimum amount needed is an indication that our state priorities are misguided.

Further, this recent tax cut would cost the State of Florida jobs, according to testimony by the Florida Legislature's Chief Economist. If we had \$438 million to spare and wanted a short-term economic benefit, then I believe that money invested in higher education, like our state community college or state university systems, would bring public/private partnerships and skilled jobs into the state. If we had these funds and wanted a longer-term economic gain for the state, then the appropriate investment would be in our K-12 public education system.

Either way, the economic impact would be lasting and felt statewide. Tax cuts to large corporations, however, benefits few and puts the economic health of our state at risk.



- **The Environment Pays the Cost** - I believe that those charged with protecting the environment failed in our responsibility. The Legislature took \$100 million out of the Preservation 2000 Trust Fund, a trust fund established for the sole purpose of buying environmentally sensitive land. Spending money earmarked to remain "in trust" is a violation of an ethical responsibility. Without Trust Fund money, it would have been very difficult to meet our state's operating needs while still funding corporate tax cuts. By taking Trust Fund money, environmentally sensitive land has been placed at risk.

I could not vote for a budget that would give large tax cuts to corporations while ignoring the needs of our schools. When considering the under-funding of education along with the raid on the Trust Fund, I voted against the budget.

## Reapportionment

Every ten years, following the release of the U.S. Census data, the Legislature must reapportion its boundaries to ensure that each legislative district contains approximately the same number of people, thereby providing equal representation to every Florida citizen.

In characteristically strong bi-partisan fashion, members of both parties worked on the Senate Reapportionment Map. As members of the two major parties in Florida, Senator Laurent and I sponsored the final Senate map. I believe this map was as fair as could reasonably be expected, given that the presiding party during any redistricting process is not about to cede its power. I have thanked the Senate Leadership for showing this fairness. However, I do not necessarily feel the same way about the maps adopted for the House of Representatives or the United States Congress, both of which have been undergoing the process of judicial review.

## The Aftermath of 9-11

Since September 11th, 2001, many of you have expressed your needs and concerns. This has been an emotional - and even frightening - time for us all, as the "9-11" disaster has affected each of us deeply.

The Legislature made the post-September 11th issues a priority, and considered numerous pieces of related legislation. Below are three bills I sponsored that have been signed into law dealing with this issue.

### Caring for Those Who Put Their Lives on the Line for Us

Sometimes it takes a disaster to remind people of who our "heroes" are. Too often, the "heroes" of our society are regarded as people who can throw, catch or hit a ball, sing, dance or act. Our true heroes, however, are the brave men and women in uniform who place their lives on the line every day to protect the rest of us.

Florida has had a death benefit available for the surviving family of firefighters or law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. This benefit had not been increased in almost fifteen years, and did not provide sufficient educational benefits for surviving children or spouses of law enforcement officers or firefighters killed in the line of duty. This legislation increased the death benefit, indexed it to inflation, and improved the educational benefits to the surviving spouse and children.



### Homeowners' Associations and the Right to Display the American Flag



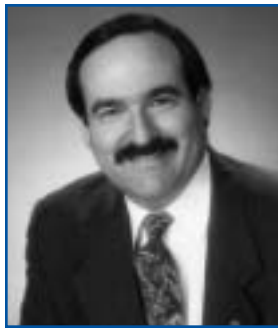
It is hard to imagine that any good could have come out of September 11th. If any good has come out of this, it has been a resurgence of the American spirit and patriotism. The symbol that people have been rallying around is the American Flag; it serves to unite all of us, regardless of political, cultural or religious differences.

In the weeks immediately following 9-11, while the President and Governor had declared states of emergency and asked us to display the American flag, certain homeowners' associations began imposing fines if the American flag was not flown pursuant to the by-laws of their homeowners' associations. To counter this offensive posture of the homeowners' associations, I introduced legislation that now gives all homeowners the right to respectfully fly one portable removable American flag.

### Protecting Florida from Airborne Terrorism

Earlier this year, one of the terrorist leaders had investigated renting a crop duster in South Florida. As Chairman of the Agriculture and Consumer Services Committee, I felt that the potential use of crop dusters for spreading chemical or biological agents needed to be dealt with immediately. Working with the crop dusting industry, I sponsored legislation that will now place limits on who can rent crop dusting equipment, and the types of uses permitted.





### **District 29 Address**

400 S. Federal Hwy, Suite 204  
Hallandale Beach, FL 33009



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## **IMPORTANT NUMBERS**

Adoption Information	1-800-962-3678	Consumer Product Safety	1-800-638-2772	Insurance Hotline	1-800-342-2762
AIDS Hotline:		Dept. of Agriculture &		Lemon Law Hotline	1-800-321-5366
(English)	1-800-352-2437	Consumer Svcs. Complaints	1-800-435-7352	Organ Donors (The Living Bank)	1-800-528-2971
(Spanish)	1-800-545-7432	Dept. of Revenue (taxpayers)	1-800-352-3671	Poison Information	1-800-282-3171
(Creole)	1-800-243-7101	Dept. of Veterans' Services	1-800-827-1000	Public Service Commission	1-800-342-3552
Airline Safety Complaints (FAA)	1-800-322-7873	Discrimination in Housing &		Radon Gas Hotline	1-800-543-8279
Alzheimers Association	1-800-272-3900	Employment	1-800-342-8170	Social Security Hotline	1-800-772-1213
Banking & Finance	1-800-848-3792	Division of Blind Services	1-800-342-1828	Storm Insurance	1-800-227-8676
Cancer Information	1-800-422-6237	Elder Helpline	1-800-262-2243	US Coast Guard	1-800-424-8802
Child Find America	1-800-426-5678	Family Source/Parent Helpline	1-800-352-5683	"Wildlife Alert" Hotline	1-800-342-1676
Child Support Info Hotline	1-800-622-5437	Florida Marine Patrol	1-800-342-5367	Workers Compensation Claims	1-800-342-1741
Children/Adult Abuse Hotline	1-800-962-2873	Hurricane Hotline	1-800-342-7940		